

Toward a transparent, inclusive and humble church

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Plenary INSIGHT

A Daily Blog



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SYNODALITY AND CORESPONSIBILITY SHOULD ACCORD AN EQUAL VOICE AS WE WALK TOGETHER

Thank you for the many generous messages of support. I have been allocated to a group of twenty-eight members which will discern two questions: 14 (governance) and 16 (social services). Without knowing more that seems a big ask.

During the Opening Mass from Perth today I reflected upon my twin expectations: good process and good outcomes.

Good process for me includes three elements: practical two-way open-ness to the broader Catholic community, a full discussion of all the issues raised during the Plenary Council consultation process ('everything on the table') and one voice one value. All three things may have to be fought for if recent history is any guide.

The Plenary Council authorities have resisted making it easy for the Catholic community to contact Plenary Council members directly. For more than a year now the idea of releasing the email addresses of members has been knocked back. Not only does this mean that the pesky church reform movement is kept at bay, but even church agencies themselves have had to scramble to manufacture their own home-made set of email addresses. This is crazy.

Plenary Council members themselves can reach out to the community, but any outreach during the Assembly, like this blog, must contend with the Code of Conduct, which imposes a form of Chatham House rules for the small groups. This accords some privacy to small group discussion and rightly protects the integrity of the discernment process, but the general direction and vibe of the discussions should remain transparent to the broader community. I will be trying to walk that fine line.

We have been promised since the consultation began that every matter raised by the community must be on the table; and this means even matters which can only be resolved by the Vatican. Yet the Plenary Council Agenda Questions we have been presented with steer clear of apparently contentious issues – like women’s role in the church – that the community has definitely made a high priority.

The idea of synodality and co-responsibility means that all members should be accorded an equal voice as we walk together. But modern synodality is grafted onto the old clerical and hierarchical church. Undue deference to those in authority remains embedded and has been evident during the Plenary Council preparations so far. Challenging this culture is a constant necessity; yet it can grind you down.

Good outcomes mean an inclusive, transparent and accountable church and a humble church which engages with modern society and smell of the sheep. Ultimately this must mean cultural change within the church at individual and collective levels. The conduct of the Plenary Council itself should model these principles.

Inclusivity must mean an equal role in church decision-making for lay people, especially women. Transparency must mean that church affairs, including financial matters, are not restricted to privileged insiders. Accountability will naturally follow because leaders will be held to account in a way that is impossible now. All of this will mean the creation of new institutions, like diocesan pastoral councils, and the revitalisation of some existing ones.

Recent information provided to Plenary Council members has filled many gaps in our knowledge about the process, but apprehension remains. The first Plenary Session on Monday morning will set the tone. Let us hope that it points us in the right direction and is not bogged down too much with the necessary formalities.

Meanwhile I am off to our final orientation session, followed by the first evening of Plenary Tracker.

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